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CORRECTION OF MISINTERPRETED DATA ON THE PSYCHIATRIC
STATUS OF REPATRIATED VIETNAM PRISONERS OF WAR

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Correction of Misinterpreted Data on the Psychiatric Status
of Repatriated Vietnam Prisoners of War *

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Correction of Misinterpreted Data on the Psychiatric Status
of Repatriated Vietnam Prisoners of War

Abstract

In a review of literature pertaining to the psychiatric status of Vietnam RPWs during second year follow-up evaluations, it was discovered that some of the data had been poorly formulated and erroneously interpreted in published reports. The purpose of the present paper is to delineate the problem and to derive appropriate interpretations of the material. It is concluded that there was notably less pathology among RPWs during this period than had been implied in previous reports.

Correction of Misinterpreted Data on the Psychiatric Status of Repatriated Vietnam Prisoners of War

While reviewing literature that pertains to follow-up studies of repatriated prisoners of war (RPWs), some material was found which seems to have resulted in a misinterpretation of the psychiatric status of Vietnam RPWs two years following their return to the United States. In an early report of the follow-up evaluations, O'Connell (1976) presented a table that is difficult to interpret and which conveys an overly negative impression of the psychological condition of the Vietnam RPWs. A portion of the same table, inviting further misinterpretation, recently appeared in a chapter by Hunter (1978) in a book on stress disorders among Vietnam veterans (Figley, 1978). The purpose of this brief report is to delineate the problem and to clarify interpretation of the data.

Information presented at a medical meeting in 1975 concerning POW/MIA matters is displayed in Table 1 (O'Connell, 1976, p. 16). Attention is directed to several apparent interpretations of this table, evident contradictions, sources of misinterpretation, and corrected interpretations.

Table 1
 Navy and Marine Corps Returned Prisoners of War
 Psychiatric Diagnoses - 1975
 Second Year Follow-up
 N=102
 (O'Connell, 1976)

	1974	No. 1975	%	months captive
Marital Maladjustment	(10%)	9	19	68
Obsessive-compulsive Personality	-	8	17	70
Hysterical Personality	-	5	10	61
Depressive Neurosis	(13%)	5	10	72
Anxiety Neurosis	-	4	8	67
Alcoholism	-	4	8	63
Adjustment Reaction	-	4	8	80
Schizoid Personality	-	3	6	62
Schizophrenia	-	1	2	-
Behavior, Symptoms, Subjective Complaints				
Hypomanic Behavior	-	1	2	-
Fatigue	-	1	2	-
Impotence, partial	-	1	2	-
Speech Disturbance	-	1	2	-
Neurological Symptoms	-	1	2	-

Apparent Interpretations

1. Figures which appear in the No./1975 column indicate numbers of RPWs (e.g., nine of 102 individuals received a diagnosis of Marital Maladjustment).
2. A summing of the No./1975 column values might lead to the conclusion that 43 of the 102 RPWs received a clinical diagnosis, while five others experienced notable symptoms or complaints. Thus, for 48 RPWs (i.e., 47% of the sample) there was a diagnosis or clinically important symptom.

3. The percentages shown in the third column seem to reflect the relative frequency with which the several diagnoses occurred among the group of 102 (i.e., 17% of the RPWs were diagnosed as having an Obsessive-compulsive Personality).

4. A summing of the percentage column implies that 88% of the RPWs received a clinical diagnosis, and 10% were given a symptom/complaint rating.

Evident Contradictions

1. The percentages listed are approximately twice as great as the value derived if the full sample of RPWs is indeed being considered (e.g., for Marital Maladjustment the figure for 9/102 would be 8.8% vice 19%).

2. There is an inconsistency in "apparent interpretations" of the frequency and the percentage data. For example, one way of interpreting the material would indicate that 43 RPWs (42% of 102) received a diagnosis, whereas a review of the percentages suggests that 88% received a clinical diagnosis.

3. Other tables in the O'Connell article indicate that only 29 of the 102 RPWs (i.e., 28%) received a psychiatric diagnosis (O'Connell, 1976, Tables 3-7). Thus, the author subsequently concludes that "most of the RPWs are doing quite well" (p. 21).

Sources of Misinterpretation

1. Numbers listed in the No./1975 column actually relate to the number of times the diagnosis was given during the second year follow-up. For example, the diagnosis of Marital Maladjustment occurred nine times. Therefore, the column sum of 48 reflects the total frequency of diagnoses/complaints vice number of RPWs.

2. Some RPWs received more than one diagnosis or symptom rating. Apparently, 29 RPWs received a total of 43 psychiatric diagnoses.

3. The percentage column reflects the frequency of a particular diagnosis/symptom in relation to the total number of diagnoses/symptoms given to the group of RPWs. For example, of the 48 diagnoses/symptoms given, nine (or 19%) were Marital Maladjustment. Thus, the sum of the percentages column would of necessity total to approximately 100%.

Corrected Interpretations

1. Twenty-nine of 102 RPWs (28% of the sample) received a clinical diagnosis during second year follow-up evaluations.

2. Some RPWs received more than one diagnosis/symptom.

3. During the course of the examinations, 43 diagnoses and five symptom/complaints were recorded by examining clinicians.

4. Of the 48 diagnoses and symptoms/complaints assessed, 19% were Marital Maladjustment, 17% were Obsessive-compulsive Personality, 10% were Hysterical Personality, etc.

5. It is not possible to determine the number of RPWs that received only one psychiatric diagnosis. For example, one RPW could have been evaluated as having Marital Maladjustment, Fatigue, and Impotence.

The importance of clarifying the interpretation of the O'Connell material is highlighted by the fact that his data have been presented in a misleading form without comment by Hunter (1978, p. 202) in a widely disseminated work regarding Vietnam veterans. As seen in Table 2, only the several diagnostic categories and their respective "percents" were reported. The only possible interpretation of Hunter's table is that 19% of the 102 RPWs were diagnosed as having Marital Maladjustment, 17% were diagnosed as Obsessive-compulsive Personality, and so forth.

Table 2
Psychiatric Diagnoses for Navy and Marine Corps
POWs Two Years Post-Return
(N=102)
(from Hunter, 1978)

Diagnosis	Percent
Marital Maladjustment	19
Obsessive-compulsive Personality	17
Hysterical Personality	10
Depressive Neurosis	10
Anxiety Neurosis	8
Alcoholism	8
Adjustment Reaction	8
Schizoid Personality	6
Schizophrenia	2

Clearly, there has been a notable and regretable imprecision in the interpretation of O'Connell's data pertaining to the psychiatric status of Vietnam RPWs at the time of second year follow-up. There actually was much less pathology among these RPWs during this period than was implied in the Hunter article. It is heartening to understand that the rate for Marital Maladjustment was 8.8% rather than 19%, and that the rates for other diagnoses were also comparably lower than those published. Similarly, it is good to know that the over-all rate of psychiatric diagnosis was 28%, i.e., 29 of 102 RPWs receiving diagnoses, rather than 88%.

In the interest of scientific accuracy, it is crucial to acknowledge the cited discrepancies and, insofar as possible, to disseminate the correct interpretations. The most up-to-date information regarding patterns of psychiatric findings among Vietnam RPWs (from repatriation through 1975) has been reported by Spaulding, Richlin, O'Connell, and Holtzman (1978).

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